



MEDIA RELEASE

May 19, 2020

For IMMEDIATE Release

Contact: Dawn James, Director, PIO, Kit Carson County Dept. of Public Health and Environment

719-346-7158, ext. 116

KIT CARSON COUNTY RECEIVES COVID-19 VARIANCE FOR CHURCHES AND RESTAURANTS

On May 16, 2020 the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment notified the Kit Carson County Health Department and KCC Board of Health that the requested Variance from Executive Order 20-28 was approved. At the time of this writing, Kit Carson County is one of 9 counties in the State that has received an approval, with 24 counties who have submitted for variances still waiting to hear if they will be granted one. So far, the vast majority of the requests have been to open restaurants, gyms and churches. All of the counties who have been awarded a variance are listed on the Colorado COVID-19 website. Details regarding what the variance was for and what additional elements needed to be added in order to move forward are listed.

The KCCDPHE Variance took over three weeks to receive approval and went through three iterations before finally being approved by Jill Hunsaker Ryan, Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. The original intent for submitting a variance request was to get our “non-essential” small businesses, churches and restaurants open – the application was written prior to the Stay at Home Orders had been lifted. As a result of the delay in receiving a response from the State, the original request was no longer needed since small “non-essential” businesses including shops, furniture stores, salons, allied health professionals, etc. were already given the go ahead to open back up under the “Safer At Home” Orders.

The remaining urgent need was then to get restaurant dine-in capability and churches back on line. The variance that was received was approved for those two specific purposes. It allows churches to have in-person worship services again with limited capacity of 50 people per room and allows restaurants to have dine-in services while maintaining social distancing rules. These rules limit the seating capacity based on square footage and the ability to keep tables/booths 6 feet apart with chairs pulled out from the tables. ***The variance does not address anything else in the County outside of churches and restaurants.*** It does not allow large gatherings of people in other settings or activities. Currently under Executive Order 20-28, gatherings of 10 are allowed for those remaining areas that were not covered by the Variance that was received. In addition, youth-related outdoor activities and agriculture related

venues are allowed if organizers submit a plan for Social Distancing to the county health department. Two plans for youth and agricultural-related venues have been received to date.

Receiving the variance does not mean that we are back to “business as usual”. This was a first attempt at loosening restrictions in Kit Carson County that were created by EO 20-28 and will give us time to test the waters to see if the number of COVID-19 cases can be maintained at or below 5% even with easing most restrictions. Active surveillance and testing will be intensified by the KCC Health Department for the coming 4 weeks to see if adding churches and restaurants back to the economy will move the dial higher in numbers of cases of COVID-19. If an increase to 10 cases in a week occurs, the variance will be rescinded by the State. If we can maintain a low COVID-19 caseload in our county, it is the intent of the Kit Carson County Public Health Department to immediately recommend additional variances to be submitted that would include recreational venues such as bowling alleys, theaters, gyms, play grounds, pools etc. It has been hard to predict what the next steps will be from the State of Colorado, so we will plan to move forward with additional variance applications that could allow the County to also proceed with summer activities such as July 4th, Fair, and other larger public gatherings.

This request cannot be made until we have the data that proves that we are able to maintain a low incidence of COVID in the County. We will be asking residents in the County to help us with surveillance activities by submitting to additional COVID-19 testing in mid-June. A countywide testing opportunity is being planned. The more tests we conduct, the more we can show that we are COVID-19 free (or very low in incidence.) The tests will be free to the public and will not require a doctor’s order. Symptomatic and asymptomatic people are urged to participate so we can have at least 50 additional tests completed. Final details for the mass testing will be released in early June.

Testing is extremely important for a number of reasons. Patients need to know whether they have COVID-19 so they can seek treatment, isolate themselves for 14 days, and inform others they may have come into contact with. Expanded testing will help to prevent further spread of coronavirus. Once tested and confirmed positive, individuals who may not know they have been infected can isolate themselves to contain the spread. Furthermore, as we begin to relax restrictions on our economy and society, testing will provide public health experts and policymakers with crucial information about how the virus is spreading in our communities so that we can adjust our response accordingly.

The bottom line is this: the more testing we can do, the more we can suppress the spread of coronavirus in our state, and the sooner we can relax more restrictions on our economy.

The most important thing to remember about all of this is that it will take everyone living here to take social distancing seriously to keep COVID-19 from becoming more prevalent, thus delaying our return to normal activities. The same standards apply now as they did a month ago. Frequent hand washing, wearing of masks when in crowded public venues, limiting travel outside of the County to only necessary activities such as medical appointments, etc., and staying home as much as possible will keep us moving in the right direction.

WEEKLY UPDATE – WEEK 11

Since March 10, 2020, 195 People have been tested for COVID-19 in Kit Carson County. Of those tested, there have been 26 positive cases which includes the outbreak at the Grace Manor Care Center (16 people). There have been 10 community members not associated with GMCC who tested positive - 2 were in Flagler and the remainder were in Burlington and Bethune. 21 people have recovered from the virus and have been released from isolation. There have been 169 negative test results. We have not had any additional positive cases in two weeks. Currently, there are only 2 tests pending and they are retests that were sent to the State. There are 2 people in isolation and zero cases in quarantine. The community positive rate stands at 5 percent (excluding the GMCC outbreak). In order to move forward with additional variance requests, the County needs to remain at or below 5 percent positive test results to move to the next phase of the County's plan which is to lift most restrictions while maintaining social distancing guidelines. Testing and surveillance will be key as well as intense community support to keep us all COVID-19 free!

-end-